MCCLELLAN'S OTHER STORY[1]

REVIEWED BY COMMANDER MICHAEL CAVALLARO*

The United States has not suffered for lack of charismatic, flamboyant, or controversial military officers. Some of the best known military officers include World War II Generals Douglas MacArthur and George S. Patton, but many other famous names come to mind: General William T. Sherman, General George Custer, and Marine General Smedley Butler, to name just a few.[2]

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* Judge Advocate, U.S. Coast Guard. Presently assigned as the Deputy Chief of the Office of Regulations and Administrative Law (CG-0943), U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C. J.D., George Mason University School of Law; M.A., U.S. Naval War College; B.A. Villanova University.

[1] WILLIAM B. STYPLE, MCCLELLAN'S OTHER STORY: THE POLITICAL INTRIGUE OF COLONEL THOMAS M. KEY, CONFIDENTIAL AIDE TO GENERAL GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN (2012). The title is an allusion to McClellan's memoir, *McClellan's Other Story.*

[2] Sherman suffered a nervous breakdown early in the Civil War. His decision in 1864 to "March to the Sea" after capturing Atlanta began the era of 'total war" and earned him the opprobrium of generations of Southerners, which was ironic because he had a poor opinion of African-Americans and refused to have them in his army. After the Civil War, he favored a harsh policy against the Western tribes, at one point writing General Ulysses S. Grant, '[w]e must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux, even to their extermination, men, women and children." MICHAEL FELLMAN, CITIZEN SHERMAN 264 (1995).

After graduating last in his class (1861) at the U.S. Military Academy, Custer was promoted from Captain to General in 1863 at the age of 23. Earning a reputation for reckless courage during the Civil War, Custer became a controversial figure during the Indian Wars. He was court-martialed and suspended from duty for a year in 1867 for abandoning his troops to visit his wife, and his 1876 testimony detailing War Department corruption before a congressional committee was highly embarrassing to the Grant administration. His last decision—to split his forces and attack the huge Indian encampment at the Little Bighorn—has been the subject of debate ever since, and has earned him a dubious immortality.

After retiring from a career where he saw action in the Philippines, China (Boxer Rebellion), Central America (The Banana Wars), Mexico, and Haiti, Butler famously said, "I spent 33 years and four months in active military service and during that period I spent most of my time as a high class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and the bankers. In short, I was a racketeer, a gangster for capitalism. I helped make Mexico and especially Tampico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in. I helped in the raping of half a dozen Central American republics for the benefit of Wall Street. I helped purify Nicaragua for the International Banking House of Brown Brothers in 1902—1912. I brought light to the Dominican Republic for the American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras right for the American fruit companies in 1903. In China in 1927 I helped see to it that Standard Oil went on its way unmolested. Looking

Perhaps not as well known, but just as fascinating, is General George B. McClellan, commander of the Army of the Potomac from 1861 to 1862 and later, the 1864 Democratic candidate for President of the United States. Simply put, history has not been kind to General McClellan. While most historians give him credit for organizing and training the Army of the Potomac, they have sharply criticized him for his lack of aggressiveness in the field and his antagonistic relationship with President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton. Stephen Sears, his foremost biographer, wrote that "[n]o one came close to matching him as a center of controversy."[3]

In *McClellan's Other Story: The Political Intrigue of Colonel Thomas M. Key, Confidential Aide to General George B. McClellan*, William Styple[4] offers a new explanation for some of McClellan's most controversial actions during his tenure in command. Styple wrote that he became interested in Colonel Thomas Key "and his peculiar role on McClellan's staff" after he discovered an unpublished letter by General Philip Kearny,[5] in which General Kearny accused Key of treasonable activity.[6] Styple "became convinced that [Kearny's] suspicions were correct," prompting him to "investigate the life and military career of McClellan's so called 'Confidential Aide.'"[7] Styple concluded that Key "effectively influenced and manipulated one of the most powerful men in the Nation," costing McClellan "his military and political career."[8]

It must be stated from the outset that when he was appointed to command the Army of the Potomac in July 1861, the possibility that General McClellan would fail seemed remote. The son of a prominent

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back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints. The best he could do was to operate his racket in three districts. I operated on three continents." SAUL LANDAU, THE GUERRILLA WARS OF CENTRAL AMERICA: NICARAGUA, EL SALVADOR AND GUATEMALA 6 (1993).

[3] THE CIVIL WAR PAPERS OF GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN: SELECTED CORRESPONDENCE 1860–1865, at ix–x (Stephen Sears ed., 1989).

[4] Mr. Styple is a graduate of Catawba College. He has published a number of books about the Civil War and is currently working on a biography of General Philip Kearney. He has discussed *MCCLELLAN'S OTHER STORY* on C-Span American History TV, at http://www.c-span.org/History/Events/The-Civil-War-Gen-McClellan-amp-Col-Key/10737436865/.

[5] Kearny commanded a division in III Corps, Army of the Potomac. He was killed at the battle of Chantilly on September 1, 1862.

[6] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 17.

[7] *Id.*

[8] *Id.* at 16–17.

Philadelphia surgeon, McClellan had been admitted to West Point at age 15, graduating second in his class. Twice brevetted for gallantry during the Mexican War, McClellan went on to translate French training and tactical manuals, invent the eponymously named McClellan cavalry saddle, and lead exploratory expeditions in the West. In 1854, then-Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis selected McClellan for a plum assignment to observe the Crimean War. After resigning from the Army in 1857, McClellan was appointed Chief Engineer for the Illinois Central Railroad. A few years later, he became Vice-President of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. During his time at the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad, he met Abraham Lincoln, who was the railroad's attorney. After the Civil War began, McClellan was appointed a major general of volunteers. He won several small engagements in western Virginia (later West Virginia) before Lincoln summoned him east to organize and command Union forces that had been routed at the Battle of Bull Run.

A conservative Democrat, McClellan had a low opinion of Lincoln, his Administration, Congressional Republicans and abolitionists – indeed, pretty much everyone who saw the conflict as something other than a war limited to the restoration of the Union and the *status quo ante*. Democrats like McClellan rallied around the President at the war's outbreak, when the Administration's goal was simply and solely the restoration of the Union. However, by the time the conflict was only a little more than a year old, Lincoln had to disavow several of his commanders for proclaiming emancipation in their theatres, while fending off the Republicans in Congress who wanted to see the Administration take immediate steps to abolish slavery.[9] Lincoln had to proceed cautiously, notwithstanding his own feelings about slavery, to keep his coalition together, especially since prominent Democrats began to see McClellan as their standard-bearer. For his part, McClellan viewed any attempt to link restoration of the Union and the abolition of slavery as a grave mistake. In July 1862, days after his army had retreated from its position a few miles from Richmond, McClellan felt compelled to hand Lincoln his famous "Harrison's Landing Letter" which outlined his conservative views on war policy.

Historians have considered the letter a remarkable document for several reasons, one of which is that it is a field commander advising

[9] BRUCE CATTON, MR. LINCOLN'S ARMY 156—157 (1954); *see also* DAVID VON DREHLE, RISE TO GREATNESS: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND AMERICA'S MOST PERILOUS YEAR (2012).

civil authorities on matters outside his purview, as McClellan himself acknowledged in the opening paragraph. McClellan instructed Lincoln:

> [This rebellion] should not be a war looking to the subjugation of the people of any State in any event. It should not be at all a war upon population, but against armed forces and political organizations. Neither confiscation of property, political executions of persons, territorial organizations of States, or forcible abolition of slavery should be contemplated for a moment . . . . Military power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude, either by supporting or impairing the authority of the master, except for repressing disorder, as in other cases.[10]

McClellan concluded with a warning: "Unless the principles governing the future conduct of our struggle shall be made known and approved, the effort to obtain requisite forces will be almost hopeless. A declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies."[11]

That was not all. Before and after the battle of Antietam, rumors abounded that the Army of the Potomac would march on Washington to force the Administration to come to terms with the Confederacy. Sears wrote:

> In these days a sense of crisis was growing across the North as rumor multiplied the Confederate menace . . . . Some believed the crisis went deeper than simply the fear of another Southern military success. He [New York diarist George Templeton Strong] had heard the most "alarming kind of talk" from General McClellan's conservative Democratic supporters predicting that he and his lieutenants would strike a bargain with their opposite numbers in the Rebel army to enforce a compromise peace on the administration. Stories of military conspiracy were also current in Washington. Henry Wilson, chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs told Gideon Welles that he had learned

[10] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 165.
[11] *Id.* at 166.

> from a member of McClellan's staff that officers of the Army of the Potomac were plotting revolution "and the establishment of a provisional government."[12]

While most historians have concluded that McClellan never intended to overthrow the Government, they have pointed to those rumors, in addition to his dilatory movements after Antietam, as factors that led to his relief.[13] By late 1862, Lincoln could no longer (and, after the mid-term elections, had no need to) tolerate a general whose views on how the war should be conducted differed so sharply from his own.

"'McClellan is to me,' Ulysses S. Grant remarked in the 1870s, 'one of the great mysteries of the war.'"[14] Trying to explain him, Bruce Catton wrote:

> He was trusted to the point of death by one hundred thousand fighting men, but he himself always had his lurking doubts. The soldiers firmly believed that where he was everything was bound to be all right. They would gladly awaken from the deepest sleep of exhaustion because they felt that way. After Malvern Hill an entire division, underfed for days, deserted the sputtering campfires where in a gloomy rain it was cooking the first hot meal of the week, in order to splash through the mud and hurrah as he galloped down the road, and felt satisfied even though all the fires went out and breakfast was sadly delayed. But it seems McClellan was never quite convinced. It was almost as if some invisible rider constantly followed him, in the brightly uniformed staff that rode with him, and came up

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[12] STEPHEN SEARS, GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN: THE YOUNG NAPOLEON 271 (1988).

[13] *E.g.*, *id.* at 272 ("It cannot be imagined that George McClellan would have lent himself to an attempted military coup. However little loyalty he felt for the Lincoln administration, there was never a doubt of his loyalty to the Union."). *See also* EDWARD H. BONEKEMPER, III, MCCLELLAN AND FAILURE: A STUDY OF CIVIL WAR FEAR, INCOMPETENCE, AND WORSE 170 (2007) ("In the seven post-Antietam weeks, beginning with the day after the Sharpsburg bloodbath, McClellan passed up the opportunity to attack Lee's decimated forces and move the North toward victory. He appears to have been motivated by a lack of desire for any fighting at all, a continuing fear of failure aggravated by his usual misreading of enemy strength, and an anathema for Lincoln and his emancipation policies.").

[14] ETHAN S. RAFUSE, MCCLELLAN'S WAR: THE FAILURE OF MODERATION IN THE STRUGGLE FOR THE UNION 384 (2005).

> abreast every now and then to whisper: "But General, are you *sure*?" Every man tries to live up to his own picture of himself. McClellan's picture was glorious, but one gathers that he was never quite confident that he could make it come to life.[15]

Sears has gone further, writing about, *inter alia*, McClellan's paralyzing caution, egocentricity, paranoia, faulty strategy (while serving briefly as General-in-Chief of Union forces), poor tactics, capacity for intrigue, and want of moral courage in several books.[16] Do one or more of those reasons account for McClellan's decision to write the Harrison's Landing Letter or other decisions or statements that put him increasingly at odds with the Administration? Or might there be another reason to explain "one of the great mysteries of the war?"[17]

Styple's answer to that last question is Colonel Thomas Key, who until now has received only passing mention by historians. Styple's well-researched book argues that Key operated as McClellan's chief advisor in matters related to civil-military affairs and policy. While acknowledging that Key may have meant well, Styple concludes that McClellan's weaknesses "allowed him to be easily manipulated by his alter-ego–Thomas M. Key–the man who carried the confidence, self-righteousness, and personal conviction that McClellan lacked. It was a fatal attraction."[18] Overall, *McClellan's Other Story* is a nice piece of detective work that puts some of General McClellan's most controversial decisions and actions in a new light, even if the author's conclusion did not completely convince this reviewer.

Colonel Thomas Key was a mysterious and eccentric man. A private person, notwithstanding his pre-war occupations as a lawyer, judge, and State senator, as well as his prominent position on McClellan's staff, he was never photographed. Before he died of tuberculosis just a few years after the Civil War ended, Key requested in his will that all his books and papers be destroyed, a request that unfortunately for history was carried out. McClellan himself wrote very little about Colonel Key in his

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[15] CATTON, *supra* note 9, at 55.
[16] *See, e.g.*, SEARS, *supra* note 12, at 132–33, 139, and 141.
[17] RAFUSE, *supra* note 14.
[18] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 305.

posthumously published memoir, *McClellan's Own Story*, despite their close association during the war years.[19] Styple muses:

> Explaining why McClellan ignored Key in his personal writings can only be pure supposition; perhaps it was conceit, or contempt, no one will ever know for sure. However in order to give the benefit of the doubt to McClellan, he certainly was well aware that his closest confidant preferred life in the shadows (this is entirely consistent with Key's character) and in turn, McClellan lovingly cloaked his friend with invisibility.[20]

Undaunted, Styple drew on Official Army Records, private correspondence, diary entries, contemporary newspaper accounts, and post-war recollections from Key's close associates to make the case that "Key effectively influenced and manipulated one of the most powerful men in the Nation."[21]

Key's association with McClellan began before the War, when McClellan moved to Cincinnati after accepting the position of Superintendent of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. The Kentucky-born Key also resided there, serving as Judge of the Commercial Court of Cincinnati and after 1852 in the Ohio Senate, where the Democrat was known as "The Great Compromiser."[22] When on April 23, 1861, McClellan accepted the Governor of Ohio's offer to command the state's militia, Key's friend and former law partner William Dickson wrote that he immediately "offered his services as a volunteer aide to McClellan . . . ."[23] The historical record is unclear as to what Key's precise role was: official military service records listed him as Aide-de-Camp, but McClellan wrote that "the duties of Judge Advocate were ably performed by Col. Thomas M. Key, A.D.C." [24]

> The most integral part of the relationship between Thomas Key and George McClellan is that they agreed politically. They were conservative Democrats who supported both the Constitution of the United States and

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[19] GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN, MCCLELLAN'S OWN STORY 123, 134 (1887).
[20] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 302.
[21] *Id.* at 17.
[22] *Id.* at 21.
[23] *Id.* at 29 (quotation from the William M. Dickson Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan).
[24] MCCLELLAN, *supra* note 19, at 134.

> the Indivisible Union, and strongly disapproved of the Southern secession movement. At the same time, they also shared a deep contempt for northern radical abolitionists—including newly elected President Abraham Lincoln and his Republican administration.[25]

While McClellan was certainly a conservative Democrat, Key's political views seem harder to pin down. According to Dickson, "Key became a 'sort-of' Democrat—a strange mixture of States' Rights, patriotism, abolitionism, and a binding love of the South. His dream was to abolish slavery with the consent of the master, and this dream had with him a partial realization."[26] His fellow Ohio Democrat and 1864 Vice-Presidential nominee George H. Pendleton was quoted as saying "Key, you are a Democrat two days of the year—on election days—the rest of the year you are a Black Republican."[27]

Whatever Key's exact views were, he and McClellan were of one mind on the question of how slaves would be treated as they embarked on a campaign in western Virginia. Styple wrote that as McClellan's "Confidential Aide" and legal advisor, "Key's primary duty was to uphold Constitutional laws that protected the rights and property of slave holders. The general and his aide certainly did not want slavery to become an issue in this war of rebellion, and both men wanted to put forth a benevolent attitude toward Southern civilians," an approach both men would continue even as it became more untenable.[28] Of course, it was the modest military success McClellan achieved in this campaign that led to his—and Key's—summons to Washington.

Within days of his arrival, McClellan clashed with General in Chief Winfield Scott. The opening salvo was a letter dated August 8, 1861, in which McClellan warned that the capitol was in "imminent danger" and recommended a number of steps to "render Washington perfectly secure."[29] Scott took offense with what he perceived was McClellan's attempt to undermine him. Styple argues that the existence of "an early draft of the letter—in Key's handwriting" is evidence Key "contributed

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[25] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 23.
[26] *Id.* at 22 (quotation from the William M. Dickson Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan).
[27] *Id.*
[28] *Id.* at 30.
[29] *Id.* at 52.

much to the letter," with the goal of frightening the Administration.[30] He also noted that Key was tasked with hand-delivering the letter to Lincoln, along with a note from McClellan telling Lincoln, "[Y]ou can communicate with him unreservedly & can place the utmost reliance in his intelligence & discretion."[31] Scott responded by submitting his resignation, which Lincoln did not accept. At this point, Styple writes, "Key must now find a more subtle way to remove Scott."[32] A few months later, Lincoln did accept Scott's resignation. While admitting that "due to a lack of hard evidence" it would be hard to determine "exactly how much actual influence Key had" in that development, Styple cites an entry from John Hay's diary for what Hay believes was an "artful manipulation":

> Went over to the General's Headquarters; we found Col. Key there. He was talking also about the grand necessity of an immediate battle to clean out the enemy, at once. He seemed to think we were ruined if we did not fight. The President asked what McC. thot [sic] about it. Key answered, 'The General is troubled in his mind. I think he is much embarrassed by the radical difference between his views and those of General Scott.' Here McC. came in – Key went out.[33]

Despite General Scott's resignation and McClellan's elevation to General-in-Chief, by November 1861 it became clear there would be no winter offensive. With McClellan working on a strategy to win the war, Key "was crafting his own plan to restore the Nation by pen. Thomas Marshall Key—the Great Compromiser of the Ohio Senate—was planning to strike at the root cause of the conflict. Using all his legislative skills, Key would personally create the template to satisfy and reunify the warring sides and bring an end to the Civil War."[34]

Key wrote what became the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act, which abolished slavery in the District and compensated owners up to $300 dollars for freeing their slaves. In keeping with his character, Key took no credit for drafting the

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[30] *Id.* at 51.
[31] *Id.* at 53.
[32] *Id.* at 57.
[33] *Id*. at 70 (John Hay was Lincoln's private secretary. He later served as Secretary of State under Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt.).
[34] *Id.* at 75.

legislation. Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson introduced the bill, which was approved by House and Senate and signed by President Lincoln on April 16, 1862, despite misgivings by Republicans who termed the compensation "ransom" as well as from Democrats who were opposed to abolition, compensated or not.[35]

While Key's role in the Compensated Emancipation Act is interesting in and of itself, for Styple it constitutes the opening move in a plan Key harbored for bringing the Confederacy back into the Union, a notion Styple expands on in subsequent chapters.

In the spring of 1862, prodded by Lincoln, McClellan moved his army by water to the Virginia Peninsula. Planning a rapid march to Richmond, he was confronted by a small number of Confederate troops, who fooled him into thinking they were present in much larger numbers. McClellan spent a month digging trenches and emplacing siege guns, only to have General Joseph Johnston order a retreat before bombardment commenced. Progress up the Peninsula was slow, but by mid-June 1862 his army was only a few miles from Richmond. It was at this point, Styple writes, that McClellan and Key sought a "parley with the rebels."[36] McClellan wrote to General Robert E. Lee, who was in command of the Confederate Army after General Johnston had been wounded,, to suggest a meeting between subordinates to discuss the exchange of prisoners:

> [w]hether this manifestation of a peace conference was borne from within General McClellan's heart and mind, or, whether it was suggested by his Confidential Aide, no one will ever know for sure; but this was the moment they had been both working for. The time had come to talk reunification.[37]

General Howell Cobb, a former Treasury Secretary, represented General Lee. Key, of course, represented McClellan. During the meeting, Cobb told Key, "[t]he election of a sectional President, whose views on slavery were known to be objectionable to the whole South, evinced a purpose on the part of the Northern people to deprive the people of the South of an equal enjoyment of political rights," to which Key responded:

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[35] *Id.* at 78.
[36] *Id.* at 115.
[37] *Id.* at 120.

> A return to the Union even upon the ground of unequal forces would not involve degradation. The security of the South would be greater than before. The slavery question has been settled. It is abolished in the District and excluded from the Territories. As an element of dissension slavery cannot again enter into our national politics. The President has never gone beyond this in any expression of his views; he has always recognized the obligation of the constitutional provision as to fugitive slaves, and that slavery within and between the slave States is beyond Congressional intervention.[38]

Stephen Sears wrote about what transpired in *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon,* though much more briefly, noting, "[w]hether [McClellan] discussed Key's approach with him beforehand is not clear; in any case, nothing Key said at the parlay, held on June 15, was contrary to McClellan's views."[39] In Styple's view, Key, who called himself McClellan's "political advisor" in a letter written days after the meeting, had acted in accordance with "his own plan to construct a war policy for the Administration."[40] Key apparently believed that abolition of slavery by means of compensated emancipation, which he had orchestrated for the District of Columbia, would help persuade Confederate leaders that their rights were secure, although it only seems to show he had badly misjudged the nature of the conflict.

Around the same time Key was having his meeting, General McClellan telegraphed Lincoln for permission to present his "views as to the present state of military affairs throughout the whole country."[41] Unfortunately for him, General Lee chose to attack a few days later, beginning what became known as the Seven Days' Battles, causing McClellan to abandon his supply depot on the York River. Calling it a "change of base" rather than a retreat, McClellan nevertheless ceded the initiative to Lee, and by July 2, 1862, had withdrawn his army to Harrison's Landing along the James River. Shortly after, President Lincoln decided to visit Harrison's Landing to judge the condition of the

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[38] *Id.* at 130 (from the letter written by Colonel Thomas Key to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton dated June 16, 1862).
[39] SEARS, *supra* note 12, at 203.
[40] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 133 (The letter referred to was from Key to Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase, who was a longtime friend of Key's beginning from their days in Ohio politics.).
[41] *Id.*

army for himself. It was during that visit that McClellan presented Lincoln his "views" in the famous Harrison's Landing Letter.

The Harrison's Landing Letter is arguably one of McClellan's most controversial acts during his tenure in command. Thus, whatever role Colonel Key had in it is of considerable historical interest. Styple argues persuasively that Key was the Letter's primary author.

Styple notes that the original Harrison's Landing Letter, currently part of the Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, is in Key's handwriting, and signed by McClellan.[42] Stephen Sears has written that McClellan "wrote a remarkably large share of his military correspondence himself, and almost everything that relates to matters he regarded as important can be found in his own handwriting."[43] While not dispositive (McClellan could have dictated his thoughts to Key), that fact suggests that he and Key at least collaborated in the composition of the Letter. But Styple goes further, asserting that the Letter reflects two distinct voices, with those sections covering civil and military policy, including the warnings that "[m]ilitary power should not be allowed to interfere with the relations of servitude," and any "declaration of radical views, especially upon slavery, will rapidly disintegrate our present Armies," being in Key's voice. [44] In addition, Styple provides quotes from a number of Key's close associates, the majority of whom believed the views expressed in the Letter were those of Key.[45]

If Key was the primary author, it would seem he modified a belief expressed in his letter to Secretary of War Stanton following his meeting with General Cobb. He wrote, "[I]t may be found necessary in particular States, if not all to destroy the class which has created this rebellion, *by destroying the institution which has created them*."[46] While the

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[42] *Id.* at 162.
[43] THE CIVIL WAR PAPERS OF GEORGE B. MCCLELLAN, at xi (Sears, ed., 1989).
[44] STYPLE, *supra* note 1. at 165–66.
[45] *Id.* at 161.
[46] *Id.* at 130 (emphasis added) (Key expressed the same sentiment in a letter to Treasury Secretary Chase a few days later:

> I feel assured that if we beat the rebels out of Virginia and the population does not submit, but military occupation becomes necessary and it becomes apparent that the removal of our forces would be followed by rebellion, then [McClellan] will regard it to be a measure of military security and necessity to disorganize the

Harrison's Landing Letter acknowledges "slaves . . . seeking military protection, should receive it," and "the right of the Government to appropriate permanently to its own service claims to slave labor . . . and the right of the owner to compensation," it is an expression of views on the subject of slavery that appears to be, at least to this reviewer, much more conservative than the sentiment expressed by Key following his meeting. Perhaps this softer language reflects McClellan's beliefs rather than Key's.

But even if it is true that Key was the primary author of the Harrison's Landing Letter, his effort did McClellan no good. Writing of it, Bruce Catton notes, "[McClellan] suddenly switched from military planning to political planning—with disastrous results. . . . [T]here can be no doubt whatever that the final effect of the letter was to convince Lincoln that McClellan was not the general he could use to win the war."[47]

After his visit to Harrison's Landing, President Lincoln made up his mind to remove the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula. Another Federal Army, under the command of General John Pope, was operating in Northern Virginia. Lincoln reasoned that units from the Army of the Potomac could be used to reinforce Pope. Disagreeing vehemently with Lincoln's decision, McClellan moved slowly and made only a few units available to Pope, who was decisively defeated at the Second Battle of Bull Run. With misgiving, and over the objection of his entire Cabinet, on September 2, 1862, Lincoln directed McClellan to once again take command of demoralized Union forces to defend Washington.[48]

Stephen Sears has noted that from this time until McClellan was removed from command in November 1862, there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether the Army would march on Washington and demand the Administration begin negotiating a settlement with the

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> condition of society which gives rise to disloyalty and to *abolish the institution which creates the disloyal class*.

Id. (emphasis added)); *see also* RICHARD WHEELER, SWORD OVER RICHMOND: AN EYEWITNESS HISTORY OF MCCLELLAN'S PENINSULA CAMPAIGN 285 (1986) (suggesting that McClellan would not have been happy to have heard or read of this sentiment).

[47] CATTON, *supra* note 9, at 155–56.

[48] SEARS, *supra* note 12, at 13–16.

Confederacy, or that certain Administration officials be removed, or simply overthrow the Government.[49]

Before the battle of Antietam, Key apparently squelched talk among a group of "high officers" to "countermarch the army back to Washington in order to intimidate the Administration and impose policy," according to a then-*New York Tribune* reporter who only told the story years after the war ended.[50] This account has appeared in other books on the subject of Antietam.[51] Styple examines the episode more closely.

Less well known is the Antietam Armistice, which Styple describes at length. Writing to General Lee on behalf of General Kearny's widow, who was requesting some of the General's personal effects, McClellan's letter "created quite a stir at Lee's headquarters; some believed that McClellan's communication obliquely suggested an armistice."[52] Styple's account of the Armistice is quite fascinating, although this reviewer discerned that Key's only involvement in it was to deny, in a conversation with a former Confederate officer after the war ended, that "any communication had passed between Lee and McClellan upon the subject of the truce, for he certainly would have known it if there had."[53]

Regarding the Emancipation Proclamation, which Lincoln issued on September 22, 1862 (only five days after the battle of Antietam), Styple noted that "Lincoln completely disregarded McClellan and Key's warnings stated in their July 7 Harrison's Landing Letter. The question now became: would the Army of the Potomac remain loyal to the government, or disintegrate as the Commanding General predicted?"[54] McClellan met with General Jacob Cox, who later wrote, "The total impression left upon me by the general's conversation was that he agreed with Colonel Key in believing that the war ought to end in the abolition of slavery; but he feared the effects of haste, and thought the steps toward the end should be conservatively careful and not brusquely

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[49] *See, e.g.*, *id.* at 271.
[50] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 200.
[51] SEARS, *supra* note 12, at 111.
[52] STYPLE, *supra* note 1, at 236–37.
[53] *Id.* at 239 (from a letter that appeared in the February 14, 1872 *Macon Telegraph & Messenger* by Augustus Octavius Bacon, former adjutant in the 9th Georgia Regiment and future U.S. Senator from Georgia).
[54] *Id.* at 257.

radical."[55] It would seem that by this point Key had convinced McClellan; recall that after his meeting with Cobb he wrote that the institution of slavery might have to be destroyed, but the Harrison's Landing Letter made that argument, if at all, very weakly, suggesting to this reviewer that McClellan's opinion was then still dominant.

The last chapter of Styple's book is particularly interesting in that he has assembled a number of newspaper articles and recollections of friends who opine on Key's role and the extent of the influence he had over General McClellan. The *Cincinnati Gazette* wrote, "We suppose that Colonel Key was the writer of McClellan's famous letter of advice to Lincoln, after his retreat from the James river [sic]; a letter which was rather extraordinary under the circumstances . . . ."[56] The *New York Tribune* wrote:

> The country has reason, perhaps, to complain of the large influence he exerted over Gen. McClellan in the inspiration, and also in the actual composition of many of the letters on political subjects with which Gen. McClellan helped to embarrass the Administration and distract the public sentiment concerning the war . . . .[57]

One close friend of Key, Donn Piatt, described him as "McClellan's evil genius," while William Dickson disagreed:

> At this late date Donn Piatt makes the discovery that Key was the "evil genius" of McClellan. Piatt's discourse runneth thus: McClellan's political obtrusiveness caused his ruin. Key caused this obtrusion. Piatt is at fault on both points. Of course McClellan's interference in politics was a glaring weakness, but it was only a single manifestation of a general incompetency, unfitting him for command. Nor was Key responsible for McClellan's politics nor for their offensive assertion. McClellan's politics were his

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[55] *Id.* at 259 (General Cox was a colleague of Key's in the Ohio Senate; a Republican and abolitionist who fully supported the Emancipation Proclamation; he was later a Governor of Ohio.).
[56] *Id.* 297.
[57] *Id.* at 300.

> own, or rather of his school; they were not of a far reaching character.[58]

Although Styple might reject the term "evil genius," he is firmly of the opinion that General McClellan was a weak leader, susceptible to manipulation by Key, which was harmful to McClellan personally and, more importantly, to the Union cause generally.[59] This reviewer tends to agree more with Key's friend Dickson, who placed responsibility for McClellan's political pronouncements and opposition to Lincoln and his Administration primarily with McClellan. However, one does not have to completely agree with Styple's ultimate conclusion to appreciate the importance of the relationship between McClellan and his Confidential Aide, which was not yet fully explored by historians until now. McClellan's trust in Key gave Key an outsized role in the conduct of military affairs as long as McClellan commanded, from his assistance in clearing the way for McClellan's appointment as Commander-in-Chief, to his role as chief negotiator in a peace parley, to the composition of the Harrison's Landing Letter. Styple's well-researched book has brought an obscure figure out from the periphery of Civil War commentary; moreover, it should stoke more discussion and opinion about one of America's most controversial military leaders.

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[58] *Id.* at 302–04 (Donn Piatt served as a Colonel in the war, and later became a journalist. As for Dickson, in addition to being Key's law partner, he too served in the Union army and later became a judge.).

[59] *Id.* at 305 ("Their blended idealism created a ruinous mixture of war and politics that was unrealistic and ultimately doomed to fail, likely prolonging the war they vainly tried to stop.").